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Ortbals contests Legal Services consolidation

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Attorney Gerald Ortbal is calling congressmen, and he's urging other St. Louis lawyers to do the same.

Ortbals is hoping to stop a consolidation of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, which provides legal aid to needy individuals in the St. Louis area, with three other state legal aid groups. Ortbal claims such a consolidation could lead to the loss of LSEM's assets and threaten the group's local fund-raising efforts.

The national Legal Services Corp., which provides about two-fifths of LSEM's \$5.7 million budget, has pushed for five years for the consolidation of the state's four legal aid organizations. Proponents said the consolidation would help stretch legal aid funding by reducing administrative costs and would ensure more equitable funding of programs throughout the state.

Nine months from the planned merger, Ortbal, a senior partner at Stinson Morrison Hecker, is forming a "Committee to Save Legal Services of Eastern Missouri." The self-described legal services activist and past fund-raiser for LSEM, is the author of a letter declaring "the end of LSEM as we know it." The letter, dated March 11 and sent to attorneys at the top 25 law firms in St. Louis, urges recipients to contact local members of Congress and administrators at the national organization to ask them to stop the consolidation.

Missouri Gov. Bob Holden has picked up the issue and sent a letter to Legal Services officials asking them to reconsider the plan.

LSEM's service area includes northeastern Missouri starting at the Iowa border, St. Louis City, St. Louis County, and Franklin, Jefferson and St. Charles counties. The other legal aid organizations in Missouri are Legal Aid of Western Missouri, which serves the Kansas City area; Mid-Missouri Legal Services Corp., which serves the area around Columbia, and Legal Services of Southern Missouri.

All the organizations provide free attorney advice, offered by staff and volunteer attorneys, to lower income clients. Cases represented include landlord/tenant disputes, child custody cases, loss of pensions or domestic violence problems.

LSEM serves about 6,000 people a year with about 30 staff attorneys and a total of about 87 employees. Under the proposed merger, some jobs that duplicate a function performed by the statewide organization could be eliminated, said Dianne Taylor, executive director of LSEM.

The plan — approved by the Missouri Bar Association and a statewide commission — would create a state board that would oversee the four regional programs. The location of the state entity hasn't been decided, but Ron Mitchell, chairman of the statewide commission, said it likely would be based in Jefferson City. The central office would communicate with and distribute the funding provided by the national Legal Services Corp., which is federally funded.

Services would be provided regionally, with regional directors hired and fired by the state board. The current programs would continue, with money raised locally kept in the regional program.

Ortbals said donors might not believe that the money would remain in the community and fail to contribute. He said it could particularly affect the organization's current \$4 million campaign for an endowment and expanded programs. LSEM also could lose control of its assets, including the "Center for Justice" building which houses the organization, Ortvals said. St. Louis attorneys and law firms pitched in \$1.3 million to purchase the LSEM building at 4232 Forest Park.

"Once they control the enterprise, they control the assets. It's only a matter of time," Ortvals said.

F. William McCalpin, board member of the national Legal Services Corp., doesn't mince words in countering that argument: "That's really crazy."

McCalpin, a retired Lewis Rice & Fingersh partner, also is a member of the statewide commission that studied the issue. Under the proposal to create a single organization, the four organizations, including LSEM, would operate as separate corporations, with their own advisory boards, officers and assets, he said. "Nobody from outside can tell that corporation what to do with its assets."

McCalpin said there are strong funding differences among the four state programs, with an average of \$12 per low-income person available across the southern third of the state; \$15 in the central portion, around Columbia and Jefferson City; and \$25 per person in the Kansas City and St. Louis areas, according to figures derived from the census and legal aid programs' budgets, he said.

"In other words, there's a substantial disparity in the availability of resources in different parts of the state," McCalpin said. Urban areas are able to raise more through programs like the United Way and fund-raisers such as the Justice for All Ball.

"In a way, I think we're being penalized for placing a priority on fund-raising," said LSEM's Taylor.